

Wanted: Cinderplume

"You should've seen the look on his face. Stumbled clear onto the floor, but the beast still didn't wake!" Galmar belched and nearly doubled over in laughter, barely clinging onto his ale.

At this hour, in an otherwise quiet forest clearing, he was quite obviously the loudest thing around- but he didn't seem to mind.

He poured more and more into his mug, still not able to get over Thorald's mistake.

The fire crackled away, and whilst Galmar guffawed at his dear "friend's" failure, Jorn pulled forth six glistening golden eggs from his bag.

The three glowered overhead, lavishly licking their lips. But in a fit of lucidity from his foolhardiness, Thorald spoke up.

"You don't think she'll find us? We should've gone farther!"

Galmar punched his arm. "Shut up! Your mood's just about turning my ale rotten."

Jorn shrugged as he cracked each egg one by one into a pan, paying little heed to the warnings.

It's a pity Galmar's voice drowned out the sound of wings beating angrily against the night.

Jorn was the first to go, as a beast as gold as its offspring rent his neck from his shoulders. Thorald stumbled back, crying, begging to be spared- but was crushed under talon into the dirt below.

Galmar, ever the fighter, pulled his keg away and lit it. "If I'm going down, I'm taking you with me!" he yelled, and threw the barrel.

Horrid shrieks were heard for miles as feather and fool were incinerated along with the forest they stood in.

T'was Alaina's first time truly experiencing the Dwarven highlands. She saw and met many people, both bold and brash, tasted many beers and even participated in some brawls! One thing she wished to see during her time here though, more than anything, was from the tale of the Greater Golden Gryphon.

Far larger than their kin, and with plumage far more vibrant, Alaina wondered if such a noble creature could truly exist.

The locals who she asked, however, spoke in hushed tones- the local woods in which the Gryphons hunted had taken to flame just a day prior.

These tales could never deter a fearless Knight, however.

Alaina crossed rushing rivers, windswept wealds, lands of such vibrance it reminded her even a little of Stormsong. Though beauty ended when she came across the burned, buried forest.

Weak croons, bleeding with sorrow, exited a winged beast atop a tor which Alaina crept upon with the greatest of care. Its feathers still held the glint of gold, yet each and every one of them was stained and charred beyond belief. Before it? An empty nest.

"Scrraw!"

The Gryphon emitted a most terrible cry and displayed its full wingspan, beating great winds at Alaina that carried the scent of soot and cinders.

It glowered at her, almost aflame, and its beak emitted even the smallest smoke. In her foolhardy kindness, she reached out her hand to soothe it.

The beast was hurt, anguished, and it had experienced a horrible trauma. Clearly, it barely survived the forest fire and came to find its clutch gone.

Couldn't she ease it's pain?

No. Not all pain was mendable, as she'd soon find. The beast's warning was unheard, and it leapt at Alaina with such speeds she could barely react.

A last-minute dodge was all that kept the gryphon's talons from ripping her apart, though even a glancing blow struck clear through her right shoulder. Switching her blade to her left, Alaina swung outwards and sent it reeling before scurrying into the brush... losing so many measures of blood she lost consciousness just on the outskirts of the dwarven hold she had stayed at.

Alaina flittered in and out of consciousness for the next days. Her nurse carried Alaina's words of warning, that a dangerous gryphon was on the prowl. But such an exalted creature as it, that asked for none of this, did not deserve what had come of it. These dwarves, to whom gryphons were scarce known to attack them, quickly became a local menace. "The Highland Hunter" was its initial name, but as more and more tested their hands at capturing the beast they gave it a more apt- if bitter- name. The Thane spread word across the Hold. Cinderplume had to be stopped. With each passing day, Alaina saw more and more join her in the infirmary. From well-meaning shamans, to trappers and rangers, and ever more mercenaries.

She pushed herself from her covers one morn. "Are you mad?" Her nurse spat. "Your shoulder hasn't even had the chance to heal yet. You think you have a chance?"

Alaina looked at her with a sorrowful gaze. "I can't just watch it keep hurting."

An embroidered linen roll spread across the floor, and upon it was placed three things as Alaina prepared her gear.

She took magnesium and blasting powder and encased it in a ceramic sphere, and filled it to the brim with sand. Gryphons, as beasts with incredible sight, were also sensitive in that same sense. A makeshift flash-grenade could aid her in disrupting its vision.

She took a cloth and basted her blade with a reddish oil. Marrick's Venom, as the Order called it, had been made from snake's fangs and spider legs- and any wounds created with it bled heavily. It saddened her that she knew this might be the key to defeating it- large creatures carry far more blood in their veins, and letting it can greatly weaken them.

Finally, she pulled forth a special yellow liquid from her bandolier and held it up to the light. Her last resort, and her most powerful brew- the Philter of Evened Odds. At least a week it took to prepare, and infused with such strength it magnified her speed and reflexes to incredible degrees.

Alaina looked down at the things she had gathered. These were not the tools, in that moment, of a just Knight. They were that of an executioner. She had to try, just one final time.

Deep into the wilds, Alaina tracked her target. She passed by a wagon and the savaged traders who walked alongside it. She saw its ashen feathers and followed the trail they left. She found where its powerful claws had carved into stone as it leapt once more into the air. And she finally met it, at the summit of the highest eyrie.

The winds battered so harshly against her, but unfettered Alaina stepped forwards. She left it an offering- the largest slab of meat she could find- and hoped that it would stay Cinderplume's rage. But nothing could cure its trauma. Alaina watched as the beautiful, golden gryphon she'd hoped to meet morphed into savagery. It had become a monster.

Their battle ensued with the clash of steel against talon. Slashing with rending claws, Cinderplume struck and struck in a furious flurry, but Alaina found the strength to parry or dodge the blows that came towards her. It turned and slammed its wing into the ground, and as she ducked aside Alaina ran Briarbane's blade against its bone and saw its blood bubble before her.

With each clash, a different victor came, for each score on the gryphon's tendons or its wing Alaina was met with a bite or a break.

But for all the preparation in the world, Cinderplume was greater. With some unexplained power, its feathers burned and staunched the flow of blood from its chest- and again did its beak fill with smoke. Gouts of great flame were launched towards Alaina and she scrambled to dodge away, but as she recovered the gryphon leapt at her and pinned her to the ground.

Alaina stared into the beasts' maddened eyes. "The grenade!" Her mind screamed, and she slammed her eyes shut as she drew the ceramic sphere from her belt and slammed it too into Cinderplume's face.

For a moment, everything was bright hot, and her ears rang. She felt the weight leave her, and as she stood shakily up her sight and sound returned. Cinderplume had retreated into the air, but set its eyes upon Alaina once more.

All duels have a finale, a deciding strike. Cinderplume lit up as bright as the sun and plummeted towards the ground, a falling star, to take Alaina with her.

Alaina clutched her final philter in her hands, and when it was spent crouched down with one hand on her sword's grip.

Cinderplume let out one, final, sorrowful shriek as Alaina cleaved through flesh and bone and severed its right wing from its body in a single strike.

She could not look at it, as it yawned its last breath, and left for home soon after.
Not all valour was garnered with glory.